

8, St. Martin's Place,
Trafalgar Square,
London, W.C.2.

8th September, 1949.

Dear Danny,

I was very glad to hear from you, although I know that you will be suffering from the same difficulty that I am. I mean it is hard to look back for weeks and know what is of interest to someone in another country. Besides, in my case, I write something and then forget it.

Your successors at the Palladium had to face what must be the worst summer that show business has ever known for many years. We have had now, I suppose, three months of almost uninterrupted sunshine and heat unusual in this country. How the theatre has survived, I do not know.

The nicest of all the Americans who followed you was Harpo Marx, of whom I saw a lot and got very fond. He asked me one night, after his comic clarinet act, during which the bubbles often refused to come out, to please tell Benny Goodman, who followed him, "I think Harpo plays the clarinet better than you do." The point is that for years, it seems, Benny has been warning him not to play it. I obeyed the instruction, but of course gave away the gag. Harpo seems a particularly nice fellow with a very fine wife who shares his pride in his four adopted children, one of whom was here.

George Burns and Gracie Allen were of course, in a personal sense, as popular as ever, but they had not done a stage show of any kind for 13 years and indeed their two children saw them do the first stage act they had ever seen. It was a mere wireless turn and too slow for the quick Palladium stage. George frankly admitted that he was not a success. Indeed he refused to advertise in "Variety" for that reason. "I am going back to radio," he said.

I tried to be hospitable to Kathryn Grayson and her husband, suggested showing them round London, for instance, but somehow they put it off time after time, and it never happened.

The most interesting happening of the Palladium season recently was the sudden arrival of Jack Benny. Although I expect you know about it, I will tell you what happened. I was in the Savoy one Sunday afternoon when I saw a man very like Jack Benny. Certain that he was in America, I took no notice but walked towards the counter to buy a paper. Then I heard "Hallo, Swaff." And I saw it was Jack, just in from New York. He had

come that way to make a quiet entry, knowing that the Continental planes are not watched so closely as are the trans-Atlantic ones. Meanwhile Val was giving a party in his flat. He had told Helen "Someone important is arriving from America." "I must be psychic," she said to me, "for actually I guessed who it was, but said nothing until the night before when Val said I had guessed right." Well, the party started. It included the Brissons, George and Gracie, of course, and Jane Wyman. During the eating, the telephone bell rang and Val, who went to it, said, "It's Jack Benny speaking from Hollywood." Actually it was Jane Wyman pretending to be a telephone operator but talking from the extension in the kitchen, into which Jack had been smuggled. George, who had long since grown tired of Jack Benny calling him up from long distance and then ringing off, said, "Hello Jack", and to get his own back, hung up the receiver. When he went back to the dining room, there was Jack Benny sitting there. He had come 6,000 miles to appear on the stage and wish his old friend good luck. This he did on the first night, but actually it was rather an anticlimax, because a good many people had walked out just before.

I have just been to Copenhagen for four days -- at the suggestion of Carl Brisson who was making his first appearance in his native city as a star. The news that I was going obviously reached Denmark ^{not} because, on the night before we flew, Carl called up Harry Green and said "Do ask Swaff to talk about me. The papers are full of him. I am not mentioned." Actually he had been in Copenhagen a few weeks before and did not realise here was much new to say. Well, when we got there, the one newspaper that had hired Carl to give 2 or 3 concerts under its auspices mentioned Carl, but that, as well as all the others, had columns about me day after day and night after night. I looked in at Carl's first show, sat half way through and then escaped to a supper party I had planned to attend. Next morning, Mrs. Brisson told me that one paper said something about it being a flop "because Hamen Swaffer walked out." Am I really supposed to sit all through in Copenhagen a show I had seen in London a week before? I shall have to get my hair cut next time or else wear green spectacles.

Harry Green has produced "The Return of Peter Grimm," 40 years old but new to London, but last night he was reported to have food poisoning. Although the illness may be genuine, I doubt if the show will open again as Harry's had to close the theatre, having no understudy, and you know how a thing like that is worse than hot weather.

I tried to save Harry Lauder's life and so far -- this letter is dated September 8 -- have done so. I mean that I wrote his obituary under protest, after being asked. Whenever I write an obituary, I protested, the subject of it always recovers. Henry Arthur Jones once had framed by his sick bed a letter from me saying "You are sure to get well because I wrote your obituary this morning." The same thing happened a few months ago when John Masefield fell ill. He started recovering immediately. And now Harry Lauder's obituary has been waiting for several weeks.

You will have seen by now that the Empire Theatre is copying the Radio City policy of films plus lavish spectacles. This is another warning, I am certain, that movies will soon face the same crisis that the silent pictures did when talkies came in and saved the industry. For months, except for the last house and on Sundays, West End cinemas have been half full.

Joe E. Brown has taken Sid Field's place in "Harvey." Sid was going on a holiday as you know but he fell ill. His heart is so bad that he is now allowed to stretch his arms out wide. Confidentially I would like to talk to him about giving up drink. I did so a quarter of a century ago. The trouble is, Sid is -- and I was -- too popular to be other than an abstainer. Everywhere I went, drink was forced on me with the result that it was either it or me. Perhaps some people would have preferred it.

Joe Brown has copied here his American habit of making a long speech after every show. He keeps audiences staying for 20 minutes or so while he talks the Rotary stuff of goodwill and all that sort of thing. I am afraid it would not solve the world's economic plight. When I wrote something about his speeches for the "People" a week ago, the acting editor said "But I'm told he's the meanest American who ever came here," and he told me that when recently he hired a car for the night, the chauffeur told him that when years ago, being the senior driver, he elected once to drive Joe Brown -- "another of those rich Americans" -- he did so all through his visit and then didn't get a tip. And to drive him, he complained, "I refused a most generous client." Mind you, Joe's a nice guy, but then, so is Harry Lauder and you know what they say about him. It's true.

~~Sid~~ I have broken an almost lifelong rule by dictating all this to Kate Goodson, my secretary. You must take it as another proof of my affection.

You could have filled the Palladium all this summer but I do not know anyone else. The Inkspots are doing very well here, I am told, but of course they could not last for six weeks. Personally I never listen to that sort of stuff.

Affectionate regards to Sylvia, Eddie and Sammy, and a hug for the infant I have never seen.

Yours ever,

Swaff

PS

Since writing the above, I have opened a letter from a North Wales reader who tells me, although he admires me, my weakness is that I "simply worship actors" - ~~actually~~ actually, I have often been accused of hating them. I should tell them that Jesus said rich men, in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, should give away their possessions, ~~he goes on~~.

Am I afraid of losing their friendship, he asks, by not telling them.

Reminding me that there is a very unequal distribution of wealth, he adds "Danny Kaye maybe a nice chap to know, but please don't fawn on him. You will be doing your rich friends a real service by reminding them of what Jesus said to the man who had too many possessions."

So I have warned you. Don't tell Louis Mayer. We don't want him in Heaven.

H.S.